DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 233 FL 023 079

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TITLE Discussion as Inquiry in ESL/EFL Reading: A Study of Taiwanese College Students' Meaning-Construction of a Literary Text through Small Group Discussion.
PUB DATE 29 Mar 95
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (29th, Long Beach, CA, March 26-April 1, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; College Students; Discourse Analysis; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication; *Language of Instruction; *Literature Appreciation; Second Language Instruction; *Small Group Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Taiwanese

ABSTRACT

This study examined how 20 Taiwanese college students of English as a Second Language (ESL) used small group discussion as a medium to construct meaning from a literary text. Students were divided into five discussion groups and instructed to discuss in English only. Each group's interaction was audiotaped and transcribed, then analyzed by topical units reflecting a common perspective and revealing recurring discussion patterns. Five discussion patterns were identified: negotiating meaning; evaluating meaning; savoring meaning; converging meaning; and avoiding meaning. Excerpts from discussions are included here. Results suggest that the possible benefits of small group discussion depend primarily on the willingness of group members to genuinely consider others' ideas and opinions. Some suggestions are made for helping ESL students view group discussion as an inquiry process. Contains 27 references. (Author/MSE)

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ED 384 233

DISCUSSION AS INQUIRY IN ESL\EFL READING:

A STUDY OF TAIWANESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' MEANING-CONSTRUCTION OF A LITERARY TEXT THROUGH SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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PAPER TO BE PRESENTED AT THE 29TH ANNUAL
INTERNATIONAL TESOL CONFERENCE
LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA
March 26-April 1, 1995

FL023079

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how twenty Taiwanese college EFL students used small group discussion as medium to construct meaning from a literary text. Twenty college students were divided into five discussion groups and were requested to discuss in English only. Each group's discussion was audio tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Topical units were used to analyze the data. A topical unit reflected a common perspective and revealed recurring discussion patterns. As a result, five discussion patterns were identified - negotiating meaning, evaluating meaning, savoring meaning, converging meaning, and avoiding meaning. The findings suggest that the possible benefits of small group discussion primarily depend on the willingness of the group members to genuinely consider others' ideas and opinions. Some pedagogical suggestions as to how to help ESL/EFL students view group discussion as an inquiry process are proposed for teachers' classroom implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing body of research has supported the notion that social interactions among students assist them in sharing and exchanging what they know and in creating socially-mediated meaning from texts (Dillon, 1988; Hansen, Harste, and Short, 1991; Smith & Smith, 1994). The location of meaning within reading events, in fact, also involves intrapersonal connection-making, meaning that one shares what one reads with others since meaningful constructions are often extended into a natural social interaction (Bloome, 1985; 1987; Hynds, 1990; 1991). When students ask or answer questions of each other about a text, they decide what is important about that text, how their responses to the text may be confirmed, and whether certain answers are likely to be direct inferences from the text or whether such answers are actually derived from personal knowledge. Moreover, by means of social interactions, students organize their comprehension based on what they want to understand and what is unclear to them. Such interactions naturally encourage students to share with each other information and thoughts about texts and foster both group orchestration of comprehension, and re-reading and re-thinking of textual content (Jacobson, 1990; Kletzein & Baloche, 1994).

Classroom talk may be one of the best avenues to enhance and help students establish preferences, priorities, pictures of life challenges, and life themes. While most teachers agree that classroom discussion is a valuable teaching technique (Alvermann

& Hayes, 1989; Alvermann, Dillon & O'Brien, 1990; 1991· Simpson, 1994), they sometimes disagree about what constitutes discussion. In many instances, teacher discourse includes questions, usually text based, and commentary or re-statements, often quite extensive. That is, "discussions" are really reactions in which teachers control the turn-taking, do most of the talking, ask low-level informational questions, and limit students to two- or three-word answers (Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1987). In "discussions" such as these, the structure of what is said is largely predetermined by the teacher, and student responses do not significantly influence outcomes (Nystrand, Gamoran & Heck, 1993). In fact, these discussions are used to evaluate students' comprehension, not to exchange ideas about a text. Teachers ask questions to which they already know the answers and lead students to the "correct" response. Cintorino (1993) firmly advocates that a "true" discussion be an open exchange of ideas and opinions about topics that may not have easy answers. Students, not teachers, ask questions and they also respond directly to each other rather than to or through teachers. In this sense, students learn to explain their reasoning for differing interpretations and to value these differences. Teachers frequently play a minimal role, as student participants determine the direction they need or want to take to construct meaning. In these exchanges, students clarify and refine their thinking and expand their views by hearing others' interpretations.

Previous studies as to how ESL/EFL students construct meaning through small groups in the classroom setting have shown that social interactions can significantly enhance ESL/EFL learners' second language acquisition (Long & Porter, 1985; Pica & Doughty, 1986; Gass & Varonis, 1985). From a pedagogical point of view, Long and Porter (1985) have highly valued group work because it increases language practice opportunities, improves the quality of student talk, helps individualize instruction, promotes a positive and effective climate, and motivates learners, even among groups of non-native English speakers. For ESL learners, The more language learners hear and understand or the more comprehensible input they receive, the faster and better they learn (Krashen, 1986). However, those studies focus primarily on the promotion of speaking proficiency, and neglect the use of texts as a medium for constructing meaning or facilitating reading comprehension through processes like group interaction where meaning is further negotiated.

Complicating the use of social interaction as a source for making meaning is the fact that, from a socio-cultural point of view, Taiwanese/Chinese students avoid classroom discussion and group interaction as a source of meaning-making with texts and instead respect the "authoritative voice" (Chi, 1994; Field, 1984; Maley, 1990; Smith, 1983) as the origin of all textual meaning; that is, Taiwanese students believe that teachers and textbooks possess authoritative knowledge that can be drawn upon and deposited directly into their heads. Throughout the

Taiwanese educational system, there is little interaction between teachers and students, let alone interaction and socialization among students in formal classroom situations. Thus the potential of Taiwanese students to develop interpretation and the use of critical thinking is limited in their classroom.

In light of these tendencies, and recognizing that Taiwanese learners may find it difficult to change from revering the authoritative voice to respecting interactive learning, I avoided using the classroom setting as a place to investigate how students negotiate and construct meaning. Rather, I explore the meaning-constructing process in small group interactions in an informal setting, in which I asked student volunteers to participate in this study. The primary research framework in this paper focuses on how five groups of Taiwanese EFL college students use small group discussion to inquire.

2. METHODS

(A) Participants:

Twenty Taiwanese college students, majoring in English, participated in this study. They were taking an Oral Training Course with me when this study was conducted. In general, these students had been exposed to at least six years of high school English, taught mainly by the grammar-translation method, and one or two years of university-level English. In general, their linguistic competence in English were proficient enough to express their opinions, though their linguistic performance was

not perfect.

(B) Text:

In order to select a suitable text for this study, I decided to select a text meeting the following criteria:(A) its content should be unfamiliar to participants, (B) it should have potential for multiple layers of interpretations, (C) it should contain adequate ambiguities for discussions from different perspectives, and (D) it should be short enough to be finished in a class period. Of the several texts selected by two EFL instructors and me, the short story The Discus Thrower written by Richard Selzzer met the above-mentioned criteria, and was selected, graded on the basis of the levels of its language and conceptual difficulties, and was therefore highly recommended by other college EFL instructors as a most suitable literary text for these advanced college students to discuss. This story is approximately 1,300 words, with a theme dealing with a patient's struggle against death.

(C) Data collection procedures:

Twenty participants were divided into five small groups, each of which had four members. Participants were given choices to select their group peers. Two types of data were gathered for this study: a small group discussion and a group oral interview.

(a) **Small group discussion:** Each participant first read the story individually and then sat in a circle, four as one group,

to discuss the text. Each group was told to discuss in English only, with no time limitation.

(b) **Small group oral interview:** After small group discussion, each group was interviewed as to whether the small group discussion facilitated their reading comprehension.

Both types of data were audio tape-recorded and verbatim transcribed by two research associates.

(D) Analyzing the discussion responses

Topical units were used to analyze the small group discussion. A topical unit reflected a common perspective and revealed recurring patterns. The following dialogue provides an example of several utterances, drawn from part of a group discussion which illustrated two topical units.

Example:

Joe: What does "down you go" mean ?
Jane: It means that the doctor pressed the button to make the bed go down.
Joe: From the bed?
Jane: Yea, because the bed can be raised and pushed down. But the patient also feels his mood is very very "down". He is in a low spirit. (A)
Besides, I wonder whether the patient is a young man or an old man?
Ma: I think he's an old man.
Sue: I think he's a young man.
Jane: According to the text, the patient was described as "close-cropped white hair." White hair?
Sue: White hair?
Jane: Oh! I just feel the patient's action, especially the way how he threw the eggs.
Ma: But an old man could do this, too.
Sue: Yea, you are right. But an old man might face this problem differently and may have more guts to face life difficulties. (B)

(A) Negotiating meaning

(B) Evaluating meaning

In this small study, five discussion patterns appeared in the ways as to how groups approached a literary text. These patterns were negotiating meaning, evaluating meaning, savoring meaning, converging meaning, and avoiding meaning. TABLE 1 provides a definition of each pattern.

In order to ensure the credibility of the analysis, the transcripts were first coded by myself, the researcher, and then by two EFL teachers. I discussed the coding system with them and provided two or three samples of each category that I identified. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Any data which produced disagreement between two of us (me and the two teachers) were dropped from the data pool, and any unclear utterances that appeared in the tape recordings were not included. After long conversations and negotiations, the inter-rater reliability we eventually reached was 81% and 84% (me and the two EFL teachers) and 83% (the two EFL teachers themselves).

E. Results

I will succinctly present the total results of the five discussion patterns (TABLE 2), revealing which discuss pattern each group focused on, and then discuss aspects of each pattern separately and in more detail. In addition, Table 3 provides a brief numerical result of each group's attitudes as to whether the small group discussion promoted their reading comprehension.

TABLE 1: Definition of each discussion pattern

discussion patterns	Definition of each pattern
1. negotiating meaning	Discussants request for information, clarification, or elaboration of the text.
2. evaluating meaning	Discussants confirm and challenge peers' viewpoints and to make judgmental statements as to whose opinions are more valid.
3. converging meaning	Discussants center more on the use of the participants' personal life and previous literary experiences as resources by shifting discussion attention away from the text as a focus.
4. savoring meaning	Discussants take delight in the meaning of the text or appreciate the writer's writing styles.
5. avoiding meaning	Discussants shy away from making sense of the text or the discussion topics.

TABLE 2: NUMERICAL RESULTS OF EACH DISCUSSION PATTERN

	A	B	C	D	E	totals
negotiating	8	7	5	3	2	25
evaluating	8	8	6	3	3	28
converging	4	6	6	2	2	20
savoring	6	4	3	2	0	15
avoding	0	1	2	5	8	16
totals	26	26	22	15	15	104

TABLES 2 shows the numerical results of how each group employed five discussion patterns. The most significant finding in this study is that participants engaged with the current literary text in diverse ways. From TABLE 2, it is obvious that Group A and B employed Integrating and Evaluating strategies more than did Group D and E, whereas group D and E, especially Group E, employed more avoiding strategy. This may be due to each group's attitudes toward the small group discussion as a tool to facilitate participants' reading comprehension and the strategies that each group employed. In turn, participants in Group A, B, and C became more involved in using the first four types of strategies instead of avoiding strategy as they discussed about the text. Moreover, it is entirely expected that Group A, B, and C produced more topical units than Group D and E. In general, during discussion, most of participants were attentively engaged in constructing meaning based upon their understanding and appreciation of the story.

TABLE 3: Each group's attitudes of the influence group discussion on their reading comprehension

group	reading comprehension influenced by small group discussion
A	Yes.
B	Yes.
C	Yes.
D	Somewhat.
E	No.

TABLE 3 yielded a numerical division of the groups into three evaluation stances toward the small group discussion -- positive, negative, and neutral (somewhat). TABLE 3 shows three out five groups responded positively to the small group discussion as a tool to promote their reading comprehension. On the other hand, one group negatively responded to the small group discussion. These two distinctive results may be due to participants' willingness of the group members to genuinely consider others' ideas and opinions. Such a result not only demonstrates these young people's learning preferences, interests, and orientations, but also illustrates how participants collaboratively construct and re-construct meaning through texts, peers, and even themselves. The following section provides inclusive discussion as to how these five groups employed five discussion patterns.

3. DISCUSSION

My discussion of the five constituents of small-group discussion as inquiry should not, however, be construed as representing a series of necessarily separate entities from negotiating, evaluating, converging, savoring, and avoiding meaning. In fact, it is common for participants to negotiate, evaluate, savor, convergent, and avoid meaning recursively and simultaneously at moments. The separation of such a particular sequence of these constituents is, then, reflective more of my rhetorical needs than of the natural process discussants go

through.

Negotiating meaning

The process of meaning-negotiation involved my participants requesting information, clarification, and elaboration of the text, and in speculating about the author's intent, all of which culminated in a sharpened, heightened sense of self. The main function of meaning negotiation is a communication strategy in which a question is usually raised in response to a statement, for the purpose of bringing members of the group into the discussion and, as a result, the anticipated answers are embedded. The following examples demonstrate such situations.

[Example 1: In reference to Group A]

Vive: What is this article about? I am somewhat confused with the main ideas of this story.
Ed: Let me start. I think this article talks about a doctor's caring, caring about his patients. The patient is not in a bad mood when he gets a serious disease. So he needs more care from his family or anybody. Many people don't care about them because they think they are dangerous, dirty, etc. So they leave them alone. When they are in a bad mood, they will act strangely. I think this patient should be cared by his family, doctors, or nurses.
Rick, what do you think?
Rick: (Silent).
Vive: I think the patient is, is just ... legless and the doctor discovered that he must do something for such a situation.
You: In my opinion, the patient had to be very happy before. It seems there is something happening to him and change, and changed his life. Therefore, he cannot see, loses his leg, and can not walk again and now what he can do is only stay in bed in the hospital and be served and be fed by someone. She lose his freedom and she looks very depressed.
Rick: The patient may be a famous person before and he could not suffer from being a person like the way he is now.

[Example 2: In reference to Group B]

Rose: What do you think of his reaction to the plate of eggs?
Yen: See, "he lifts the plate and gets to feel the plate and centers it and balances it" (Read from the text).
Inga: I think his actions to throw the eggs on the wall is very significant.
Rose: Maybe I think he puts eggs on ...
Yen: I think he wants to control something. Maybe in his life he can't control him because he lost his leg so he would like to control something, for example, the eggs.
Ken: He missed the days when he had his own leg.
Inga: I think he has no choice, but he wants to control something, probably the eggs as what Yen just said.
Ken: Probably, the eggs symbolize a life, a new life. He was angry with his new life, a life with only one leg.
Rose: How smart! (All laughed whole-heartedly).

[Example 3: In reference to Group C]

Ada: What does the title mean?
Dan: Nn... Maybe it means a person who throws plates. So, a plate of eggs is a symbol here.
Fion: Nn... What does "discus" mean here? (In Chinese)
Dan: I see, so the patient may be a hero in the sports game before and now he is sick and even has only one leg so he feels pessimistic. When he thought about his past, he missed his wonderful life of the past, as a hero, as a star in the sports field.
Eve: Nn... It makes se se, at least I better understood why he throws a plate of eggs against the wall. When I read the story alone, I thought it was ridiculous, but after discussing with you, I felt his weird behaviors all make sense. In fat, I finally paid a pity on this patient.

Obviously, from the above examples, the shared community encouraged participants to negotiate meaning. When personal meanings are shared with communities of readers, different interpretations enhance potential meaning-construction for all. More importantly, members of the group felt comfortable and confident bringing their voices to the shared community. When participants realize that changes and differences are naturally

created, they might view such changes and differences as opportunities for them to balance, compare, re-examine, re-value and re-judge their own comprehension and interpretations compared with those of others. With such beliefs, participants may be more willing to learn and to grow.

Evaluating Meaning

Evaluating meaning is a strategy whose function is not only to confirm or challenge another's viewpoints, but also to make judgmental statements about ideas or opinions made by the members of the group more valid. The function of evaluating meaning is to maintain and support the continuity of group discussion, and as a result, meaning is collaboratively extended and enriched. The following examples exemplify such situations.

[Example 4: In reference to Group B]

Rose: I think the patient feels relaxed and ...
Inga: I think he is dead
Yen: No! I don't think so. It tells us his is recovered.
Inga: You don't think he is dead. Why? Do you think what happened to him?
Rose: I think when ... after he threw the eggs, he must have felt relaxed.
Inga: But, the word "deceased" means that he's dead.
Yen: I don't know. "Clean". I think it's clean. What is clean? See, it says,"the wall looks white very clean and very white." So I think the word means clean. I think he is recovered and went home.
Ken: No, I think it means dead. He is dead.
Rose: That's why the doctor said "the patient's face looked dignified." I think this is what the patient cares. Now I understand why he looks dignified. Because as a handicap, he might feel that he's different from other people. And from other people's point of view, he is different, and maybe other people many not show respect to a handicap. No, I am pretty sure dignity is what the patient really wanted to have at this moment.

[Example 5: In reference to Group D]

Ma: I wonder whether the patient gained a kind of cancer.
Joe A kind of skin cancer? (He went back to read the text). Maybe.
Sue: I am not sure.
Joe: Yea, he was so ill, very ill, especially mentally ill.
Ma: But the author did not mention what type of disease the patient got.
Sue: So, we don't know it is a kind of skin cancer or not.
Joe: Maybe he was burned by a big fire so he also lost his leg as well as his family or relatives. Something like this.
Sue: Very possible. Because he lost his family members so he was so sad that he got angry.

From the above examples, Evaluating meaning enabled my participants to reformulate themselves as readers, thinkers, and learners. My participants were challenged to think for themselves, were ultimately responsible for themselves. Such a situation enhanced their self-realization, through which they had to use the self as an instrument of understanding, since the process of shaping and acting on commitments is not a simple matter. While evaluating the text, participants were naturally involved to jump outside the textual frames and to create their own frames. The following examples present such situations.

[Example 6: In reference to Group C]

Eve: After reading the story, I have been thinking if I were the doctor, would you let the patient throw a plate of scrambled eggs on the wall?
Dan: Against the wall.
Eve: O.K. Against the wall.
Dan: I think I would.
Fion: I would probably help the patient throw the eggs (All laughed).
Dan: Well, but throwing the eggs is just a way to relieve his emotion and anger. I think the doctor should find out why he was so emotional and angry.
Fion: But doctors are always busy and they never care so much what the patient thinks or how he feels. I think the

doctor is a good and kind doctor. He seems really to care about this patients.

In essence, my participants actively sought out opportunities to look at things in new ways, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and to consider and evaluate perspectives other than their own by evaluating meanings. Evaluating meaning caused my participants to discover new aspects of the work and deepen or even change their initial understanding of it and of themselves. My participants responded to literary texts in part as a process of self-definition and self-identification.

Converging Meaning

Beach (1991) advocates using autobiographical responses to interpret texts. Such responses are viewed as an interpretive form of narrative to help readers construct language, knowledge and experiences and ultimately to re-construct themselves. In this study, converging meaning provided opportunities for participants to integrate their voices and to develop their ways of knowing by shifting their discussion attention away from the text, centering more on their personal life resources and social contexts. The following examples illustrate such cases.

[Example 7: In reference to Group B]

Rose: I heard a boy called Kenny. He had no leg.
Yen: Several years, there was a movie called ... I could not remember, a movie talking about a man having a leg,..
Inga: My Left Foot.
Yen: Yea. It was very touching movie, a encourage movie.
Inga: Encourage? Courageous!
Yen: Courageous.
Ken: I saw, I read a book last summer about a boy without

his leg. I think he is very brave. I respect him because he is very excellent in handling his life problems.

Inga: Why is he more excellent than us?

Yen: Well, he lost his leg and ...

Inga: So, we, we should study hard because we have legs, eyes, a complete body.

Rose: I read a story on the newspaper about a lawyer. He lost his leg but he used his hands to work and he became a very successful lawyer.

[Example 8: In reference to Group A]

You: Just three years ago, I was in hospital to operate my knee. I had a knee operation. And then my parents didn't come to see me and I stayed in the hospital alone about one day. When the doctor sent me to the operating room, I felt scared to death. I was so weak and surrounded by many doctors. After I woke up from the operation, I saw my father. I even cried.

Ed: ... I have same, similar experiences, in the hospital in the elementary school. I lived in hospital for a short period of time. I felt very lonely, sad and very depressed, even cried every day until my mother took me home.

Vive: I think it is very important to have somebody to care about you. Our classmate Phyllis is very happy now in the hospital because we go to see her almost every day. She has a great time in the hospital.

Rick: We should go to see her more often.

From the above examples, we see participants used converging meaning as a strategy to mesh their past, current and future literacy experiences into a whole, in that participants not only used the text but also themselves as sources for learning.

Another interesting phenomenon is that while one participant converged his/her personal literacy experiences, the others would be naturally influenced to spontaneously bring their own experiences to conversations. The process of converging meaning is like an infinitely woven tapestry, and the beginning and ending could go everywhere and nowhere. Such a process is a generative one in that it helps participants explore and expand

the words they read and the world they have been experiencing in new ways.

Savoring Meaning

During savoring meaning, participants learn first to take delight in the meaning that others disclose, and then learn to revise their own thinking as needed. Under this circumstance, savoring meaning changed readers' beliefs and orientations toward the text, and in turn, readers were more willing to undergo ambiguities and confrontations. Such appreciations of meaning eventually generated a rich variety of interpretations of the literary text. The following examples demonstrate such cases.

[Example 9: In reference to Group B]

Rose: I find a sentence is interesting. See, he said he wanted a pair of shoes, but he had only one leg.
Inga: Yea, I also wonder why he asked for a pair of shoes. Probably he imagined he still had two leg, two legs.

[Example 10: In response to Group C]

Dan: I like the article, full of thoughts. This is a very rich article.
Fion: What do you mean by "rich"?
Dan: I mean the author threw many "messy" questions for us, like the patient threw scrambled eggs. I feel the author did the same way. He scrambled his ideas and we have to figure out why. It's interesting, isn't it?
Ken: Yea, when I read the article alone, I didn't like it at all. It is boring. But, after I discussed with you, I realized the article is wonderful, pushing me to think a lot.
Eve: After Dan told us this story is rich. I think I missed many wonderful parts of the story. I usually do this way. Just finishing reading it. That's all.

[Example 11: In reference to Group A]

You: I like the author's writing style. I don't know how to say, I just like it.

Vive:Very simple but with a lot of meanings.
You: Maybe.
Rick:I like his writing style. He brought me into the story but I feel lost there.
Vive:What do you mean by "lost"?
Rick:Hummmm (thinking). Sort of don't know why the patient was sick and dead. Sort of could not get the answer I expected.
You: Right! Right! I have the same feelings, too.

Savoring meaning sometimes promoted reflexive thinking which involves readers to present their problems as moments to grapple with, rather than puzzles to solve. In thinking reflectively about an interpretive problem in a collaborative discussion, readers learn to give full critical consideration to ideas. Such a shared inquiry not only improves some participants' reading comprehension and enhances their reading experiences, but also motivates them to read, so each reader's interpretations are enriched and the potential for meaning construction is expanded.

Moreover, when participants took opportunities to spontaneously share their excitement and discoveries about texts with those who they know have also discovered the pleasure, joy, and excitement of reading. These feelings not only inspire and urge them to inquire and learn further, but also compel them to make sense of the texts, to think them , and to apply them in their lives. Instead of solving incomprehension, paradox, misunderstanding, and contradictions for themselves, participants were encouraged to share their inquiry and make reflective thinking. In this sense, discussion has become a process of co-producing and co-constructing meaning.

Avoiding meaning

Discussion has its tough moments, when ambiguities prevail or difficulties mount. This can be, and usually is, a messy or even a thorny process. Unlike savoring-meaning, participants, in the process of discussion, sometimes preferred to avoid making sense of the text, especially when encountering difficulty, ambiguity, confusion or divergence. They even appear to shy away from such situations. In that case, participants tend to approach the text and the small group discussion with awe, rather than with appreciation. The following examples drawn from the interview data and discussion data demonstrate such phenomenon.

[Example 12: In reference to Group E]

Cathy: What is "down you go" mean?
Daniel:you go down (laugh)
Grace: I don't know. Let's skip it.
Cathy: But I don't know it.
Daniel: It's not important. Let's skip it, O. K.?
Cathy: (an unhappy face).

[Example 13: In reference to Group E]

Helen: What does "bonsai" mean?
Cathy: don't know. No dictionary.
Daniel: Forget it. It is not important.

[Example 14: In reference to Group D]

Sue: This story is weird. It begins with a doctor spying on his patient and then ends with the death of the patient. We never know what was wrong with the patient and why he was sent to the hospital.
Sue:And what disease did he get?
Joe: Right! I think we are wasting time here.
Ma: (Silent.)
Sue: What is the main idea of this story?
Joe: You have asked this question twice. See, we even did not know the main ideas of the story after discussion.
Ma: So far, I feel we just circled around the story and we never got it. I think we should stop discussion.

[Example 15: In reference to Group E]

Cathy: I don't feel the small group discussion improved my reading comprehension because we danced around the main idea and Daniel kept disturbing us.

[Example 16: In reference to Group D]

Joe: I think we're wasting time because we never reached a conclusion. After discussion, the questions are never answered completely.

The above examples obviously demonstrate the low tolerance for contradictions and ambiguities among these groups (Group D and E). These participants obviously learned to shy away from rather than cope with ambiguities. Under such circumstances, tense relationships among groups may arise, and discussion may result in failure or even confrontations. When the perspectives or interpretations of the story differ from their peers or from their expectations, they are afraid, or even panic. The old supports are being wrenched from them, and they may even resist the text. They are irritated and afraid when their thinking and selves are challenged. If discussion is regarded, however, as a means by which to appreciate the meaning of the text, even in the process of tension, ambiguity, contradictions, and confusions, readers should come to a re-definition of aspects of themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

Results from these twenty college EFL students in Taiwan confirm those of previous research, which advocates discussion of a text as personal and meaningful meaning-construction, because it immerses readers in a process through which they allow the

self to be molded as part of the complex and dynamic mental trip that discussion permits. The findings of this study suggest that the possible benefits of group discussion depend on the willingness of the group members to genuinely consider others' ideas and opinions. That is, group discussion may be most beneficial when group members are permeable expectations; in fact, any type of discussion can be two-way, three-way, or even four-way, but never one-way. Meaning construction through discussion should be a view of reading as understanding and communication of meaning, so that both comprehension and expression should be developed collaboratively among participants through functional, relevant and meaningful language use. This is what Bloome (1992) strongly advocates when he says that discussion as an art lies in the ability of the individual participants to apply a complex of arts --"the social art of conversing, the intellectual art of qualifying, and the linguistic art of elaborating."

5. IMPLEMENTATION

This small investigation has implications both for research and for teaching. As with all qualitative research, the five patterns generated from this study need further investigation with larger numbers and different levels of EFL students. However, some pedagogical implications do surface immediately.

First, ESL/EFL instructors should encourage students to evaluate texts and peers' interpretations for accuracy, biases,

and assumptions, to help them become critical readers. In spite of the fact that critical reading is an essential characteristic of a mature reader, many college ESL/EFL students are deficient in this ability.

Second, text-based discussions often require that students return to the text to support or to clarify their interpretations. Discussions that encourage students to return to the text to justify their interpretations help students take control of their learning and become independent readers.

Third, the success of discussion is often related to the degree to which students feel free to play their roles. Thus, English teachers must motivate, provide supportive classroom environments, and at times guide the discussion back to the topic, should it lose its focus. Individual coaching is also appropriate if students are having difficulty finding ways to express their roles. Rarely, however, are teachers given any information or practical approaches to teaching students how to discuss or how to evaluate the process of discussion so they may build upon and learn from such interactions. As a result, it is not unusual to find students practicing discussion and the teacher hoping that in this practice students will somehow, perhaps intuitively, learn the art and skill of the verbal interaction.

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